



Crack-willow
(Withy)

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2019

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

As usual May saw the Friends of The Withey Beds lead their annual guided walk and take part in the Rickmansworth Festival. The guided walk from the Batchworth Lock Centre to The Withey Beds LNR, via the Ebury Way and the Watford Piscators, proved popular. I am sure attendance was helped by the lovely weather which also brought out lots of wildlife for us to see at the Local Nature Reserve.

The Rickmansworth Festival was as busy as ever with around 30,000 people joining in the fun over the third weekend in May. The weather was nice and, despite clashing with the FA Cup Final in which Watford FC were playing, plenty of people came along to learn more about The Withey Beds LNR and why it is so special.

Earlier in the year three of our committee members, Jane Archer, Anna Marette and Jillian Christensen, undertook a survey of the ponds near the boardwalk at The Withey Beds. They found: daphnia (Cladocera), seed shrimp (ostracod), water flea (copepod), hair worm (Nematomorpha), mosquito larva (Culex), water hoglouse (*Asellus aquaticus*), small diving beetles 4mm, diving beetle larvae 10mm, gammarus shrimp, cased caddis larvae, pond snail, ramshorn snail and a small beetle like creature!

Cased caddisfly larvae are particularly interesting. The larvae will take whatever is on the river bed – stones, leaves, twigs, etc and stick them to their bodies in order to gain some protection from predators. Some people have even experimented with caddisflies by placing pieces of gold and gems in a tank with the larvae which results in some very pretty cased caddisfly larvae! There are 199 species of caddisfly in the UK and the adults, which are nocturnal, look a little like moths.



If you still receive the newsletter in the post the Friends would be really grateful if you would consider receiving the newsletter by email instead. Not only would this save the team walking many miles hand delivering the newsletters but it would help reduce the use of paper and its impact on the environment. If you are happy to receive the newsletter by email please send your email address to friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com

Nature News by Anna Marette

By May the sheep and cattle were no longer grazing on the LNR. The field was covered in thistles during the summer months and these attracted a large number of hoverfly species. The water levels varied from totally dry to overflowing ponds. Moorhen and mallard visited the wet areas and ponds. Young herons were often present at the far end. Kingfishers called and flew along the river on occasion.

Grass snakes and slow worms were present. Muntjac deer were heard barking and were seen in the field. No sign of badgers despite the badger gates.

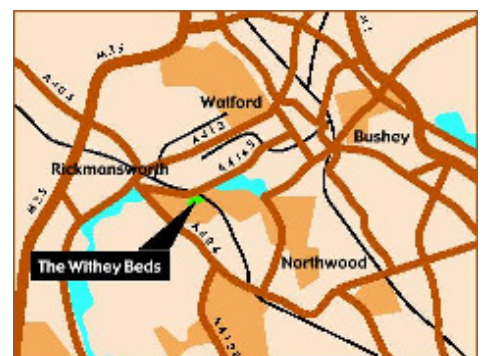
Whitethroats and blackcaps held territories around the LNR. Mistle thrush, nuthatch and treecreeper were regularly observed. Butterflies: meadow brown, common blue, green-veined white, painted lady, small tortoiseshell, red admiral, ringlet, small white and cinnabar moths were noted. The last puddle of water in the stream by the far bridge at the beginning of September held a concentration of over 20 whirligig beetles, 80 pond skaters and several water boatmen.

Membership subscriptions are overdue. If you have not yet renewed for last year please contact the Membership Secretary at 14 Sandy Lodge Road, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ with your £5.00 or the completed Standing Order form. The Friends would be grateful if you could pay by Standing Order as it makes administration easier. You can contact the Membership Secretary at friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com

WHERE IS THE WITHEY BEDS LOCAL NATURE RESERVE?

As you travel along Moor Lane, from Rickmansworth, the entrance to The Withey Beds is on your right - about 150m after the entrance to the Moor Park estate (where the security guards sit in a small building).

The LNR entrance has a green vehicle barrier and kissing gate. If you go over the River Colne on to Tolpits Lane, then you have gone too far.



Voles, Mice and Shrews

There are four vole species, five mice species and three shrew species which are native to the UK. Although they can easily be mistaken for each other at first glance there are some key ways to tell them apart.

Water voles, bank voles, field voles and Orkney voles, in general, have small ears and eyes, a rounded snout and a short tail. The fur tends to be reddish brown on the main body and grey underneath. Voles favour low-lying vegetation through which they make trails and eat roots, bulbs, bark and seeds.

Unlike voles, mice have long tails and pointed snouts. Mice also have large eyes and large ears. Most mice have short life spans living for around one year in the wild; the exception to this rule is the hazel dormouse which can live up to five years. Yellow-necked mice, harvest mice, house mice, hazel dormice and field mice are all native to the UK.

Common shrews, pygmy shrews and water shrews, which can all be found in the UK, have pointed snouts, very small eyes, small ears and pointed snouts. Shrews live in a variety of habitats depending upon the species but will use tunnels made by moles and voles. Shrews feed on insects, worms, slugs, small animals, seeds and roots and will live for around one year.

Water voles have the dubious honour of being Britain's fastest declining mammal. On the other hand there are around 75 million field voles (also known as short-tailed voles) which makes them one of the most common mammals in Britain. At 15-20cm water voles are bigger than bank and field voles which reach up to 13.5cm in length. Voles are active during the day and although they do not hibernate they are less active in winter. Field voles mark their runways with urine which kestrels, using ultraviolet light, detect to assess vole numbers and focus their hunting activity in productive areas – this might help explain why the average life span for a field vole is three to 12 months whilst water voles may live up to 18 months.

Mice are mostly nocturnal and are very good climbers. Many mice store food to see them through the colder months and, in the case of wood mice (also known as field mice), they play an important role in woodland ecology as their forgotten food stores help woodland regeneration. Mice are very abundant, house mice, for example, have 10 litters of four to eight young, per year which make mice an important part of the food chain. In fact tawny owls are so reliant on wood mice that they may not breed if numbers are low as it restricts their diet too much. Harvest mice are the smallest rodents in Europe and they have a remarkable ability to sense vibrations through the soles of their feet which helps them avoid predation.

With their continuously growing incisors mice and voles are classified as rodents. Shrews, however, are classified as insectivores. Shrews need to eat every two to three hours and some species need to consume more than their body weight each day in order to survive. Common, pygmy and water shrews are known as red-toothed shrews due to the presence of iron in their teeth which provides extra strength and water shrews have venomous saliva that is capable of paralysing prey such as fish and frogs. An endearing feature of shrews is that when a female needs to relocate her young they form a 'shrew caravan' whereby the shrewlets hold the base of the tail of the shrew in front until they have reached their destination – a lovely sight to see!



Top Row, L-R: Field Vole,
Common Shrew

Bottom Row: Wood
Mouse